Start of Transcription

00:00 Group Captain Leonard Cheshire: Sunday, September 16th 1979, Norwich Cathedral, Battle of Britain Service, The Address.

00:13 [sounds of people shuffling] to 00:22

00:23 G.C: I'd first like to say that I do count it a very, very great privilege to have been invited to give the address on this great and historic occasion in this cathedral, which is such a part of our British heritage. And in these few moments, I would like to try and look at the Battle of Britain and ask ourselves, first, 'Why is it that we have come here today as have so many other congregations, in other parts of this country, to remember it? And, having come here, what is it that we should be remembering? In what direction should our thoughts be lying?' Now, I think there are four things about the Battle of Britain that make it stand out and that are, perhaps, the principle reasons for our being here now. First, it turned the tide of the war. It turned what looked like almost certain defeat into the hope that we would carry on long enough to win. Secondly, it was fought by such a small number of men. So, few of them who stood as it were as David on our behalf. Then, it was a battle between two armies or, rather, two sets of military men. There were none of the complications that arise out of other battles where civilians are involved, where there is whole scale loss of life. In a way, it was like the battle between the knights of old and the battle that was fought with great chivalry, as well as courage and skill. And then, fourthly, those who fought it were so young. One has only to walk around the cemeteries throughout the entire world - whether in Eastern Europe, the Far East, Britain, wherever you like - and look at those tombstones and read what's on them, '17 years old'; '21 years old'. Of them, who fought the Battle of Britain and paid their supreme sacrifice, it can, truly, be said, 'Go back and tell them that for your tomorrow, we gave our today.' It was a supreme example of the sacrifice of oneself for the good of one's nation. But then I would like to take the Battle of Britain and put it in the context of the whole war. Then, firstly, I said there were so few who fought it. That, of course, was true. But only true in a limited sense because, though, the pilots in their fighter planes were few, they would never have been up there, let alone win it, had it not been for all those who had contributed towards the building of their aircrafts, planning the battle itself, keeping the nation going. I think the one big lesson that we learnt from World War 2 was that we were a united nation. We stood totally together. We knew absolutely in our hearts what our goal was. We had a great sense of desperate urgency. We knew it had to be won. We knew there could be no question of defeat, that it was, literally, sink or swim. And that shows us, I think, particularly as you let your… the eye of your mind travel over the rest of the war and all those who became involved in its fighting, against such extreme odds at the beginning, what mankind is capable of when he is truly united and when he knows what he is doing - when he has a common objective. And then, secondly, it was said we stood alone. That, also, was true to an extent but not really true because behind us we had the whole Commonwealth - as we call it now. Without that, without the bases that they gave us for future operations, without the promise of help that they gave, I doubt that battle of Britain would have led to the hope of victory. There was, also, Europe. The overrun countries who, nonetheless, were doing what they could to make life difficult for the invader. And before long there was the United States of America. A remarkable thing that, in such diversity, there could be welded, so great, a unity. And to me, that stands as a pledge, first, of the fundamental unity of our human family - of our one human family - and, secondly, of the unity, which in God's plan and purpose, will in the fullness of time - when time has run its course - by the power of God's holy spirit be brought about. You remember, perhaps, the lines in the Epistles to the Ephesians, 'God's plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in Heaven and things in earth.’ Our human destiny is unity. A unity, which at the moment we can't, possibly, conceive, which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered the mind of man to imagine. So, we should never forget [coughs] that our destiny is unity. And that man is basically the unifier. To unify not just the human family, but the entire creation. And, so, our efforts always, wherever possible, should be directed towards unity. Then, thirdly, what was the nature of the war, itself? Basically, it was to stop the threat of Hitler, to stop aggression of a brutality and a dimension that I don't think the world has ever known. But it was more than that. It was, we hoped - and believed, a war that would lay the foundations on which governments would build peace. To fight a war such as that one and keep fighting it for 6 years, you must have an ideal. Man cannot go through so much without an ideal. And the ideal - even though, perhaps, a little naive - was peace. And so, finally, what has all that got to tell us today? In the first place, I think it raises the question, 'Could there ever be justification for fighting another major war? That is the question, you will know, which exercises many minds and is answered in different ways by many people. I am talking not just of a small, limited war but should it ever - God forbid - come again, a war against a criminal aggressor, such as Hitler, determined to overrun and subjugate and submit the victim states to his own, brutal rule. If you bear with me for a moment, in order to provide the ground on which to answer that question, I ask you to look at international society as it stands today and as it is considered by the United Nations, and the other different conventions that have drawn up rules of war - the war conventions. International society consists of a series of sovereign states, at the moment. One day we may hope for a world community, but not yet. Those states are accorded certain absolute rights. Principally, the right to territorial integrity and political sovereignty. And in order to explain that, the lawyers usually invoke the domestic analogy; they compare it with the same situation, here, in one's own country. And the analogy here is that of a householder, who has the right to live safely in his house and to decide how he wants to run his family. And, so, the war convention counts as the one and only crime against international society aggression. Admittedly, aggression is not precisely defined. But for our purposes, now, I think you know what I mean. I'm talking of the kind of aggression with which we were threatened in 1939. And the state that is about to be invaded is accorded not only the right of self-defence, but the right, having won, to punish. The reason for that is that men attach a moral value to standing up to an aggressor. If you once give in - by appeasement, as we to our shame did in the 1930s, or by surrender - then you open the gates as you do in the domestic scene with kidnappers and hijackers to anybody who wants to follow the same path. We have to ask ourselves whether Christianity has anything to say about this. Does Christianity forbid us to stand up in the defence of our nation under such a situation. And the answer - without going into details - is that, although, war - particularly in the modern context - has always troubled the Christian mind. But Christian church, as a whole, has never condemned war in such a situation; it accords that right of self-defence, as it does to human beings when they are attacked. The difference is that on the international scene there is no policeman. So, in my own and humble opinion, it is in the interests of peace that we make it clear - as a nation - that if ever an aggressor [coughs] walks again, as did Hitler, we will stand up and stop him. And, of course, in order to do that we have to have the means - or the reasonable means - of doing it. And that, to my mind, is the first message that the Battle of Britain has to tell us. But that is not all the story. If the gospel tells us that our essential duty is to love our fellow man - and through loving our fellow man, to love God - then, obviously, war is something that we want to avoid. If we are put into a position where whatever we do - as with the case in 1939 - lives are going to be lost, we have to choose what we think is morally the better course of action and whichever we think will cause the minimum loss of life and, of course, freedom and justice. But we, also, have to ask ourselves, 'Are we responsible, in some measure, for the situation in which we find ourselves?' And in 1939, whoever asked that question, could only answer by saying, 'Yes! We were to blame.' In that instance, we were to blame because we never had the courage to stand up and stop Hitler when he had no power, at all. Even up and including the time of Munich. But what of today? If we look at the world around us, can we really say this is the world for which those who fought the Battle of Britain, and all the battles that made World War 2, is this the world for which they died? Is there not too much injustice? Is there not too much poverty about which we are doing so little? These are some of the questions that should be exercising our minds today. Because if justice - beyond a certain degree - is allowed to go unrequited, without our doing something positive and definite about it, we cannot hope to pass on to the next generation peace. This should be our business. We should remember that the purpose of life is the triumph of good over evil. But our purpose as members of the human family is to work for unity, and in this way we will constructively make war less likely. We can't stop an aggressor should one stand up. That is a different question. We can only stand ready if he does. But injustice is a cause of future confrontation and that - particularly in the field of the poor world - is something we can. And, in my opinion, for this is such a complex problem, one this is essential if we are to work effectively. And that is a common, national purpose to do something about it. There must be a commitment to it, before each of us can work out how in our different ways we will work for it. And one thing I have long hoped for is that the day might come when we would restore to this nation the two minute silence to remember the price that's been paid for peace, and to decide what we, as a nation, can do to make this world more liveable, to do away with some of the injustices and truly to lay the foundations of peace. And the more I have thought about it, the more I thought that of all days in the year the day that we commemorate the Battle of Britain would be the day on which we might do that.

22:55: Speech and Recording ends.

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